

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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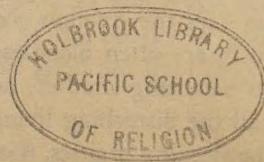
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THE HOLY EARTH*

By Liberty Hyde Bailey



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So bountiful hath been the earth and so securely have we drawn from it our substance, that we have taken it all granted as if it were only a gift, and with little care or conscious thought of the consequences of our use of it; nor have we very much considered the essential relation that we bear to it as living parts in the vast creation.

It is good to think of ourselves—of this teeming, tense, and aspiring human race—as a helpful and contributing part in the plan of a cosmos, and as participators in some far-reaching destiny. The idea of responsibility is much asserted of late, but we relate it mostly to the attitude of persons in the realm of conventional conduct, which we have come to regard as very exclusively the realm of morals; and we have established certain formalities that satisfy the conscience. But there is some deeper relation than all this, which we must recognize and the consequences of which we must practice. There is a direcer and more personal obligation than that which expends itself in loyalty to the manifold organizations and social requirements of the present day. There is a more fundamental co-operation in the scheme of things than that which deals with the proprieties or which centers about the selfishness too often expressed in the salvation of one's soul.

We can be only onlookers on that part of the cosmos that we call the far heavens, but it is possible to co-operate with the processes on the surface of the sphere. This co-operation may be conscious and definite, and also useful to the earth; that is, it may be real. What means this contact with our natural situation, this relationship to the earth to which we are born, and what signify this new exploration and conquest of the planet and these accumulating prophecies of consequence? Does the motherhood of the earth have any real meaning to us?

All this does not imply a relation only with material and physical things, nor any effort to substitute a nature religion. Our relation with the planet must be raised into the realm of spirit; we cannot be fully useful otherwise. We must find a way to maintain the emotions in the abounding commercial civilization. There are two kinds of materials—those of the native earth and the idols of one's hands. The latter are much in evidence in modern life, with the conquests of engineering, mechanics, architecture, and all the rest. We visualize them everywhere, and particularly in the great centers of population. The tendency is to be removed farther and farther from the everlasting backgrounds. Our religion is detached.

We come out of the earth and we have a right to the use of the materials; and there is no danger of crass materialism if we recognize the original materials as divine and if we understand our proper relation to the creation, then will gross selfishness in the use of them be removed. This will necessarily mean a better conception of property and of one's obligation in the use of it. We shall conceive of the earth, which is the common habitation, as inviolable. One does not act rightly toward one's fellows if one does not know how to act rightly toward the earth.

Nor does this close regard for the mother earth imply any loss of mysticism or of exaltation—quite the contrary. It increases the mystery of the unknown and enlarges the boundaries of the spiritual vision. To feel that one's useful and co-operating part in nature is to give one kinship, and to open the mind to the great resources and the great enthusiasms. Here arise the fundamental common relations. Here arise also the great emotions and conceptions of sublimity and grandeur, of majesty and awe, the uplift of vast desires—when one contemplates the earth and the diverse and desires to take them into the soul and to express oneself in their terms; and here also the responsible practices of life take root.

So much are we now involved in problems of human groups, so persistent are the portrayals of our social afflictions, and so well do we magnify our woes by insisting on them, so much in sheer weariness do we provide antidotes to soothe our feelings and to cause us to forget by means of many empty diversions, that we may neglect to express ourselves in simple free personal joy and to separate the obligation of the individual from the irresponsibilities of the mass.

* From Liberty Hyde Bailey's THE HOLY EARTH. By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.

In the Beginning

It suits my purpose to quote the first sentence in the Hebrew Scripture: In the beginning God created heaven and the earth.

This is a statement of tremendous reach, introducing the cosmos; for it sets forth in the fewest words the elemental fact that the formation of the created earth lies above and before man, and that therefore it is not man's, but God's. Man finds himself upon it, with many other creatures, all parts in some system which, since it is beyond man and superior to him, is divine.

Yet the planet was not at once complete when life had appeared upon it. The whirling earth goes through many vicissitudes; the conditions on its fruitful surface are ever-changing; and the forms of life must meet the new conditions—so does the creation continue, and every day sees the genesis in process. All life contends, sometimes ferociously but more often bloodlessly and benignly, and the contention results in momentary equilibrium, one set contestants balancing another; but every change in the outward conditions destroys the equation and a new status results. Of all the disturbing living factors, man is the greatest. He sets mighty changes going, destroying forests, upturning the sleeping prairies, flooding the deserts, deflecting the courses of the rivers, building great cities. He operates consciously and increasingly with plan aforesighted; and therefore he carries heavy responsibility.

This responsibility is recognized in the Hebrew Scripture, from which I have quoted; and I quote it again because I know of no other Scripture that states it so well. Man is given the image of the creator, even when formed from the dust of the earth, so complete is his power and so real his dominion: And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

One cannot receive all these privileges without bearing the obligation to react and to partake, to keep, to cherish, and to co-operate. We have assumed that there is no obligation to an inanimate thing, as we consider the earth to be; but man should respect the conditions in which he is placed; the earth yields the living creature; man is a living creature; science constantly narrows the gulf between the animate and the inanimate, between the organized and the inorganized; evolution derives the creatures from the earth; the creation is one creation. I must accept all or reject all.

The Earth is Good

It is good to live. We talk of death and of lifelessness, but we know only of life. Even our prophecies of death are prophecies of more life. We know no better world—whatever else there may be is of things hoped for, not of things seen. The objects are here, not hidden nor far to seek: And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.

These good things are the present things and the living things. The account is silent on the things that were not created, the chaos, the darkness, the abyss. Plato, in the "Republic," reasoned that the works of the creator must be good because the creator is good. This goodness is in the essence of things; and we sadly need to make it a part in our philosophy of life. The earth is the scene of our life, and probably the very source of it. The heaven, so far as human beings know, is the source only of death; in fact, we have peopled it with the dead. We have built our philosophy on the dead.

We seem to have overlooked the goodness of the earth in the establishing of our affairs, and even in our philosophies. It is reserved as a theme for preachers and for poets. And yet, the goodness of the planet is the basic factor in our existence.

I am not speaking of good in an abstract way, in the sense in which some of us suppose the creator to have expressed himself as pleased or satisfied with his work. The earth is good in itself, and its products are good in themselves. The earth sustains all things. It satisfies. It matters not whether this satisfaction is the result of adaptation or the process of evolution; the fact remains that the creation is good.

To the common man the earth propounds no system of philosophy or of theology. The man makes his own personal contact, deals with the facts as they are or as he conceives them to be, and is not swept into any system. He has no right to assume a bad or evil earth, although it is difficult to cast off the hindrance of centuries of teaching. When he is properly educated he will get a new resource from his relationships.

It may be difficult to demonstrate this goodness. In the nature of things we must assume it, although we know that we could not subsist on a sphere of the opposite qualities. The important consideration is that we appreciate and this not in any sentimental and impersonal way. To every bird the air is good; and a man knows it is good if he is worth being a man. To every fish the water is good. To every beast its food is good, and its time of sleep is good. The creatures experience that life is good. Every man in his heart knows that there is goodness and wholeness in

n, in the wind, the soil, the sea, the glory of sunrise, in the trees, and in the sustenance that we derive from the planet. When we grasp the significance of this situation, we shall forever supplant the religion of fear with a religion of consent.

We are so accustomed to these essentials—to the rain, the wind, the soil, the sea, the sunrise, the trees, the sustenance—that we may not include them in the categories of the good things, and we endeavor to satisfy ourselves with many small and trivial and exotic gratifications; and when these gratifications fail or pall, we find ourselves helpless and resourceless. The joy of sound sleep, the relish of a sufficient meal of plain and wholesome food, the desire to do a good day's work and the recompense when at night we are tired from the doing of it, the exhilaration of fresh air, the exercise of the natural powers, the mastery of a situation or a problem—these and many others like them are fundamental satisfactions, beyond all pampering and all toys, and they are of the essence of goodness. I think we should teach all children how good are the common necessities, and how very good are the things that are made in the beginning.

is Kindly

We hear much about man being at the mercy of nature, and the literalist will contend that there can be no salvation under such conditions. But so is man at the mercy of God.

It is a blasphemous practice that speaks of the hostility of the earth, as if the earth were full of menaces and cataclysms. The old fear of nature, that peopled the earth and sky with imps and demons, and that gave a future state to Satan, yet possesses the minds of men, only that we may have ceased to personify and to demonize our fears, though we still persistently contrast what we call the evil and the good. Still do we attempt to propitiate and appease our adversaries. Still do we carry the ban of the early philosophy that assumed materials and "the flesh" to be evil, and that found a way of escape only in renunciation and asceticism.

Nature cannot be antagonistic to man, seeing that man is a product of nature. We should find vast joy in the lowship, something like the joy of Pan. We should feel the relief when we no longer apologize for the creator cause of the things that are made.

It is true that there are devastations of flood and fire and frost, the scourge of disease, and appalling convulsions of earthquake and eruption. But man prospers; and we know that the catastrophes are greatly fewer than the accepted fatalities. We have no choice but to abide. No growth comes from hostility. It would undoubtedly be a poor human race if all the pathway had been plain and easy.

The contest with nature is wholesome, particularly when pursued in sympathy and for mastery. It is worthy a being created in God's image. The earth is perhaps a stern earth, but it is a kindly earth.

Most of our difficulty with the earth lies in the effort to do what perhaps ought not to be done. Not even all the land is fit to be farmed. A good part of agriculture is to learn how to adapt one's work to nature, to fit the crop-scheme to the climate and to the soil and the facilities. To live in right relation with his natural conditions is one of the first lessons that a wise farmer or any other wise man learns. We are at pains to stress the importance of conduct; very ill, conduct toward the earth is an essential part of it.

Nor need we be afraid of any fact that makes one fact more or less in the sum of contacts between the earth and the earth-born children. All "higher criticism" adds to the faith rather than subtracts from it, and strengthens the bond between. The earth and its products are very real.

Our outlook has been drawn very largely from the abstract. Not being yet prepared to understand the conditions of nature, man considered the earth to be inhospitable, and he looked to the supernatural for relief; and relief is heaven. Our pictures of heaven are of the opposites of daily experience,—of release, of peace, of joy uninterrupted. The hunting-grounds are happy and the satisfaction has no end. The habit of thought has been set by this conception, and it colors our dealings with the human questions and to much extent it controls our practice.

But we begin to understand that the best dealing with problems on earth is to found it on the facts of earth. This is the contribution of natural science, however abstract, to human welfare. Heaven is to be a real consequence of life on earth; and we do not lessen the hope of heaven by increasing our affection for the earth, but rather do we strengthen it. Men now forget the old images of heaven, that they are mere sojourners and wanderers lingering for deliverance, pilgrims in a strange land. Waiting for this rescue, with posture and formula and phrase, we have overlooked the essential goodness and quickness of the earth and the immanence of God.

This feeling that we are pilgrims in a vale of tears has been enhanced by the wide-spread belief in the sudden coming of the world, by collision or some other impending disaster, and in the common apprehension of doom; and by speculations as to the aridation and death of the planet, to which all of us have given more or less credence. Most of these notions are now considered to be fantastic, and we are increasingly confident that the earth is not

growing old in a human sense, that its atmosphere and its water are held by the attraction of its mass, and that sphere is at all events so permanent as to make little difference in our philosophy and no difference in our behavior.

I am again impressed with the first record in Genesis in which some mighty prophet-poet began his account with the creation of the physical universe.

So do we forget the old-time importance given to mere personal salvation, which was permission to live in heaven, and we think more of our present situation, which is the situation of obligation and of service; and he who loses his life shall save it.

We begin to foresee the vast religion of a better social order.

The Earth is Holy

Verily, then, the earth is divine, because man did not make it. We are here, part in the creation. We cannot escape. We are under obligation to take part and to do our best, living with each other and with all creatures. We may not know the full plan, but that does not alter the relation. When once we set ourselves to the pleasure of dominion, reverently and hopefully, and assume all its responsibilities, we shall have a new hold on life.

We shall put our dominion into the realm of morals. It is now in the realm of trade. This will be very personal morals, but it will also be national and racial morals. More iniquity follows the improper and greedy division of resources and privileges of the earth than any other form of sinfulness.

If God created the earth, so is the earth hallowed; and if it is hallowed, so must we deal with it devotedly and with care that we do not despoil it, and mindful of our relations to all beings that live on it. We are to consider religiously: Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.

The sacredness to us of the earth is intrinsic and inherent. It lies in our necessary relationship and in the divine imposed upon us to have dominion, and to exercise ourselves even against our own interests. We may not waste the earth which is not ours. To live in sincere relations with the company of created things and with conscious regard for their support of all men now and yet to come, must be of the essence of righteousness.

This is a larger and more original relation than the modern attitude of appreciation and admiration of nature. In the days of the patriarchs and prophets, nature and man shared in the condemnation and likewise in the redemption. The ground was cursed for Adam's sin. Paul wrote that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain and that it waiteth for the revealing. Isaiah proclaimed the redemption of the wilderness and the solitary place will be the redemption of man, when they shall rejoice and blossom as the rose, and when the glowing sand shall become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water.

The usual objects have their moral significance. An oak tree is to us a moral object because it lives its life regularly and fulfills its destiny. In the wind and in the stars, in forest and by the shore, there is spiritual refreshment. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

I do not mean all this, for our modern world, in any vague or abstract way. If the earth is holy, then the things that grow out of the earth are also holy. They do not belong to man to do with them as he will. Dominion over the earth does not carry personal ownership. There are many generations of folk yet to come after us, who will have equal rights with us to the products of the globe. It would seem that a divine obligation rests on every soul. Are we to make a righteous use of the vast accumulation of knowledge of the planet? If so, we must have a new formulation. The partition of the earth among the millions who live on it is necessarily a question of morals; and a society that is founded on an unmoral partition and use cannot itself be righteous and whole.

There was never a time in the history of America when we were as conscious as we now are of the importance of our natural resources to our national life and of the necessity of conserving them. This interest, however, inheres principally in the economic aspects of the problem. Of even greater import is the moral problem involved—a field into which federal, state, and local institutional officials enter with great hesitancy. It is at this point, however, where the church and organized religion have a great opportunity to make their influence felt. The earth is Holy, in spite of our secularization, monopolization and destruction of it. The soil is far more than a primary factor of production, as it is defined by our economists. We shall never attain a Christian civilization until we arrive at a new understanding and appreciation of man's basic relationship to the earth.

THE HOLY EARTH is the first volume of THE BACKGROUND BOOKS with the subtitle, "The Philosophy of the Holy Earth." Though originally published twenty years ago, THE HOLY EARTH has fresh meaning and significance today as we as a nation begin to bestir ourselves to a realization of the manifold implications of soil conservation. The book deserves a wide reading and a place of prominence in our library of rural and religious books. The retail price of THE HOLY EARTH is \$1.50.—J.H.R.